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JAPAN AND THE UNITED NATIONS

Summary

The United Nations has for many years been integral to Japan's concept of international relations, yet in pragmatic terms, the U.N. represents a consistent challenge to Japanese diplomacy. In order to maintain a moderate, non-controversial position on the conflicts played out there, as well as cope with the fluidity of world affairs, flexible responses are required; this style does not come naturally to practitioners of Japanese multilateral diplomacy. Recent events indicate, however, that Japan may be moving away from its traditional caution and toward the front lines of decisionmaking and leadership. Whether this policy direction can be sustained in such a hothouse of international opinion is doubtful, given various structural factors.

Troubled Beginnings

Japan's first experience with the international society concept was traumatic. Following the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and various unsuccessful attempts to curb Japan's activities in China, Tokyo withdrew from the League of Nations in 1933. The League was ineffective in dispute settlement, bore no authority to enforce its decisions and never achieved full world organization status since the United States -- and until 1934 the Soviet Union -- were not members. But despite these drawbacks, many in the diplomatic community had supported Japanese involvement, and self-imposed isolation seemed a bitter choice. Exit from the League, as one participant called it, marked the beginning of an isolationist foreign policy that ultimately "spelled self-destruction" for Japan.

Primarily due to the reverberations of the East-West conflict, re-entry into the new international regime following World War II proved to be unexpectedly difficult as well. With a "peace" constitution and strong sentiments of neutralism and "ultrapacificism," Japan's leadership set about making peace with the world, culminating in the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1951. After its acceptance into several U.N. agencies, in June 1952 Japan applied for U.N. membership.

Blocked by Soviet intransigence, though, admission was still four years away. Membership applications were subject to a Security Council vote, and the Soviet Union repeatedly vetoed Japan's entry. Soviet objections ostensibly focused on Japan's weak commitment to peace. Moscow also cited the continuing state of war between Japan and the U.S.S.R. and China (because these two nations had not entered into the San Francisco Treaty), the occupation of Japan by foreign forces, Japan's alleged lack of sovereign status, and its provision to the United States of a military base during the Korean conflict.

To offset the Soviet position, the United States pushed through the General Assembly a resolution recognizing Japan's qualifications for membership. U.S.-U.S.S.R. tradeoffs over new members postponed real consideration of Japan's membership until 1955, when a consensus was reached to admit a group of some 18 states en bloc. But Japan's admission came undone again when Nationalist China vetoed the Soviet-proposed candidacy of Outer Mongolia and the Soviets retaliated by blocking Japan's entry. It was only after the conclusion of negotiations with the U.S.S.R. to end the state of war and normalize relations in October 1956 that Japan, through some hard bargaining, won Soviet support on the U.N. issue. Japan became the 80th U.N. member on December 18, 1956, following unanimous votes in both the Security Council and the General Assembly.

Sources of Japan's U.N. Policy

To understand Japan's policies and practices in the U.N., it is important to focus on four main constraints on its activities: the domestic political setting, patterns in international relations, diplomatic style and organizational problems.

The Domestic Setting - The U.N. concept is important to Japan in both a formal and popular sense. For over 30 years it has been a highly visible priority of Japan's international diplomacy to be a fully integrated participant in the U.N. General Assembly and the specialized agencies. In fact, the organization's underlying philosophy holds such importance for Japanese theory and practice in the international arena that the precepts of the U.N. charter have been incorporated in descriptions of the country's international goals. Japan seeks to emphasize the preservation of world peace through efforts to contribute to political stability, economic development and dispute settlement. It sees these goals, elucidated in the U.N. charter, as being facilitated through participation by all nations in the U.N.

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The so-called U.N. first principle was for many years a stock feature of Japan's diplomatic "Blue Books," and, for similar reasons, the U.N. is a primary component of the multi-faceted comprehensive security approach adopted formally by the Japanese government in 1980. This followed Japan's Basic Policy for National Defense, formulated in 1957 and still officially in place, which describes U.S.-Japan security relations as temporary "pending the effective functioning of the United Nations in the future in deterring and repelling [external] aggression."

On a grass-roots level, the organization is still considered an arm of international peace and cooperation. Until very recently, public opinion polls in Japan verified that the man on the street had generally positive, even sentimental, views about the U.N. A 1984 poll by the Prime Minister's Office indicated that almost 42 percent of those interviewed gave the U.N. high marks, while about the same number expressed some skepticism about the worth of its activities. In fact, the respondents indicated some support for increased Japanese participation in U.N. activities. Almost 46 percent approved sending non-military Japanese personnel to join U.N. peacekeeping forces -- a controversial issue that policymakers have continually put aside.

Analysts have attempted to explain Japan's increased participation in the international arena in the context of the attitudes of otsukai and katagawari. Most simply put, these terms mean adopting international conduct in response to the expectations of foreign countries, and taking over the responsibility of maintaining international structures as the United States backs away from them. The combination of acting under pressure from outside forces and stepping into a more assertive leadership role as the United States withdraws is a foreign policy challenge readily acknowledged by Japan's leadership and widely debated in popular forums.

Understanding these principles makes the present situation easier to understand. Most observers agree that Japanese officials are reassessing the U.N. and Japan's role in it. Some analysts even go as far as calling it a crisis for Japanese multilateral diplomacy. The U.N.'s role in international political and economic activity seems increasingly limited, primarily since the organization is no longer seen as handling frontline issues. There is a marked tendency in Tokyo to devote the country's resources to bilateral matters, growing out of an awareness that this kind of international activity is more pressing and usually more productive than multilateralism. Furthermore, an increasing proportion of multilateral concerns today focuses on international finance and developing-country debt, and these issues are discussed and dealt with in other international agencies such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

In more recent years Tokyo's official documents have placed less emphasis on the U.N., although the rhetoric used by officials and diplomats continues to publicly support and defend the high aspirations of the international organization and the basic principles of Japan's international goals. This trend has not gone unnoticed by critics in media and academic circles. Official policy toward the organization is also closely monitored by the parties that oppose the ruling Liberal Democrats. These groups have also challenged the perceived weakening of Japan's commitment to the organization.

If there has indeed been a backing away in doctrinal terms, many observers suggest that it represents a generally mature attitude among Japanese policymakers whose enthusiasm has been tempered by a hard-won realism, galvanized over the last several years, about the U.N.'s ability to achieve the lofty goals of world peace and prosperity.

In the realm of public opinion too, there is evidence that the U.N. and the idealistic principles associated with it have lost some of their attraction. Recent public opinion surveys indicate that the Japanese do not expect as much in the way of concrete action from the U.N. or its agencies as they once did, particularly vis-a-vis peace and security issues. A poll last year revealed, to policymakers' alarm, that the public support so long taken for granted may have eroded drastically and been replaced by a hard-nosed realism. Japanese respondents in the comparative survey expressed even more doubts about the U.N. than did their Western European counterparts -- who are usually considered skeptical or even cynical about the organization and its work.

Doubts about the U.N.'s administration and financing also contribute to the more critical attitude. The withdrawal of the United States and Great Britain from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) precipitated a close re-examination of Japanese motives for involvement in the U.N. and its associated agencies. Decisionmakers concluded that although leaving UNESCO would be easier than mounting a reform campaign, withdrawal would undermine fundamental Japanese diplomatic principles, enrage public opinion and contradict international pressures to become increasingly involved in global affairs.

It is against this backdrop that the administration of Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone decided to bring Japan to the forefront of the U.N. and launch initiatives to bring about fundamental reform of the organization.

East-West, North-South - Japan's involvement in the U.N. has also been shaped by the two major conflicts of post-World War II international politics: the East-West confrontation in which Japan has sided with the United States and the North-South clash in which Japan has attempted to reconcile what are essentially unreconcilable stands on complex economic and ideological matters.

Three themes have characterized Japan's U.N. activities. From the first, Japan was openly aligned with the United States and defended U.S. leadership in the institution against challenges from communist and nonaligned blocs. A second thrust was a strong Asian identification and a determination to mediate between the developing countries and the industrialized nations of the West. Finally, because of its experience with atomic warfare, special attention was reserved for the issues of nuclear test bans and disarmament.

These policy priorities were frequently at cross purposes, as is evident from looking at Japan's issue management throughout three decades. On more strictly East-West issues like the admission of the People's Republic of China, Japan attempted to shadow the American line, although sometimes, as in the events surrounding China's acceptance in the early 1970s, Tokyo did not pick up on the rapid changes in Washington's position.

Japan's support for the United States implied voting with this country in crises like Hungary, Algeria, Cyprus, the Congo and the Middle East. However, in these situations Japan, as a member of what was then known as the

"Afro-Asian group" of developing countries, claimed to be representing the views of the newly emerging states against entrenched U.S. and European interests. As a result, it frequently ended up abstaining from votes or even voting against the so-called North in some of these cases.

Detente largely pushed superpower U.N. debates to the background. At the same time the North-South dialogue heated up. The growing discontent of the developing countries was galvanized during the early 1970s into a highly visible political push for global economic, social and cultural reform. In the hothouse atmosphere of the U.N., newly cohesive coalitions of developing countries, such as the Group of 77, were able to monopolize U.N. forums.

In economic and development affairs it was even harder for Japan to maintain its priorities. With prosperity Japan became associated with the positions of the industrialized nations in developing country perceptions. Indeed, when push came to shove, Japan more often sided with the United States and Europe on economic burden-sharing questions. Most crudely put, resource diplomacy -- the need to maintain good relations in order to secure raw material supplies and markets -- collided with basic commercial interests and attempts to preserve Japan's share of the world economy. The end result was indeed an example of otsukai -- a sense of being forced into participating in the overthrow of traditional financial and trade regimes that Japan supported and needed.

By separating rhetoric and practice, Japanese diplomats attempted to reconcile North-South antagonisms as well as promote Third World -- particularly Asian -- aims. As the dialogue gained in intensity, Japan tried to maintain support for such constructs as the New International Economic Order with its stipulations about world commodity pricing, eased debt payments, increased aid and technology transfers, and new economic regimes such as the U.N.-sponsored Law of the Sea treaty conference. But intent and actual practice veered in different directions in the attempt to cope with these stiff demands.

The end result was conciliatory posturing but little concrete support. This is not to say that the North-South dialogue did not spark change in Japan's policy; in fact, the U.N.'s impact on Japan's overseas development assistance programs has been noteworthy in terms of targets, terms and methods adopted. However, close study of Japanese participation in specific U.N. conferences, such as meetings of the U.N. Council for Trade and Development (UNCTAD) or the U.N. Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), reveals the difficulties of combining sympathy for the arguments of the South with a defensive, risk-avoiding posture. This squashed Japan's chance to become an effective player in these forums.

The only area where Japan faced little challenge was nuclear disarmament. Indeed, Japan's promotion of nuclear test ban agreements and nuclear non-proliferation arrangements are a highlight of its U.N. participation, particularly during the first half of the 1960s. However, this support did not spill over into other war and peace issues. Due to the constitutional ban on military activities in foreign nations, the assistance Tokyo could offer to periodically formed regional U.N. peace forces was limited. Ultimately, financial contributions were sanctioned, although the provision of personnel, in any

capacity, remained off-limits. Despite this compromise, Japan has been continually criticized by all parties for not providing adequate support to these peacekeeping forces.

Diplomatic Style - Diplomatic style has been one of the major constraints on Japanese activity in the U.N. Japan's international role has traditionally been considered reactive and passive; it is seen as avoiding confrontation, commitment or leadership in international meetings and organizations. In order to understand this characterization, it is necessary to examine Japanese diplomatic behavior, in addition to the entanglements of domestic politics and stated policies.

As described in the works of Michael Blaker and Haruhiro Fukui, among others, Japan's negotiating behavior is characterized by a defensive approach, with a marked preference for behind-the-scenes maneuvering, a penchant for meticulous planning and a distaste for premature commitment. The difficulty of maintaining this rather static, inflexible posture is compounded by the fact that Japanese diplomats feel tied to their initial diplomatic programs, attempt to avoid the appearance of being overly influenced by more powerful countries, and face great uncertainty from a lack of clear objectives.

Diplomatic positions, by design, are conceived and studied in Tokyo, where internal and external pressures are sorted out. After a position -- or in some cases a non-position -- is forged, diplomats are given their instructions. Individual representatives rarely have the authority to bargain on Japan's behalf, and if that kind of discretion is granted, parameters are set. Thus, when negotiating conditions change rapidly, Japanese representatives are forced to take vague, frequently indecipherable positions.

Decisionmaking in the U.N. forum calls for a flexibility that is usually not available to Japanese diplomats. As Michael Blaker in his classic study of Japanese negotiating style noted, there is

> credence to claims that Japanese diplomats are uncertain and hesitant in rapidly shifting multilateral negotiating situations. The persistent Japanese sense of insecurity in such circumstances make them appear defensive, stubborn and intransigent. Moreover, their hesitancy complicate[s] any attempt to orchestrate the complex forces that influence the bargaining process on the conference level.

Case studies of Japanese multilateral activity reveal that what has by now become a stereotype about the nation's behavior in international forums holds true. For example, largely due to the above characteristics, Japan was unable to participate effectively in one of the most important international integration schemes ever sponsored by the U.N., the Law of the Sea Conference. Although Japanese delegations were closely involved in all aspects of the long negotiating process, experts claim that there is no demonstrable connection between Japan's proposals and the final agreement. Handicapped by their diplomatic style and traditions, Japanese delegates were unable to achieve solid results despite their efforts.

The North-South confrontation provides ample examples of Japan's diplomatic style. Its decisionmaking process, faced with the onslaught of

Third World criticism, was consistently reactive rather than initiatory. Moreover, a lack of monitoring and decisiveness by Tokyo led to an uncertain negotiating behavior that was usually inconsistent and sometimes so vague that it was incoherent.

In these cases cultural elements contributed to the dilemma. However unhelpful they seemed to be, Japan's representatives, in rhetorical terms at least, saw themselves as supportive of the developing countries' cause and most of the world integration schemes discussed at that time. In an emotional, almost mystical, sense, Japanese diplomacy reflects a strong identification with Asia and a determination that Japan's special place as an Asian developed country empowers it to bridge the gaps between North and South. Despite the realities of the Japanese position, and even in the face of hopelessly deadlocked discussions, Japanese delegates seemed to believe that they could play a catalytic role between North and South and bring a more constructive tone to relations, or, in the words of foreign affairs wiseman Saburo Okita, seek out "new ways and philosophies" of economic cooperation.

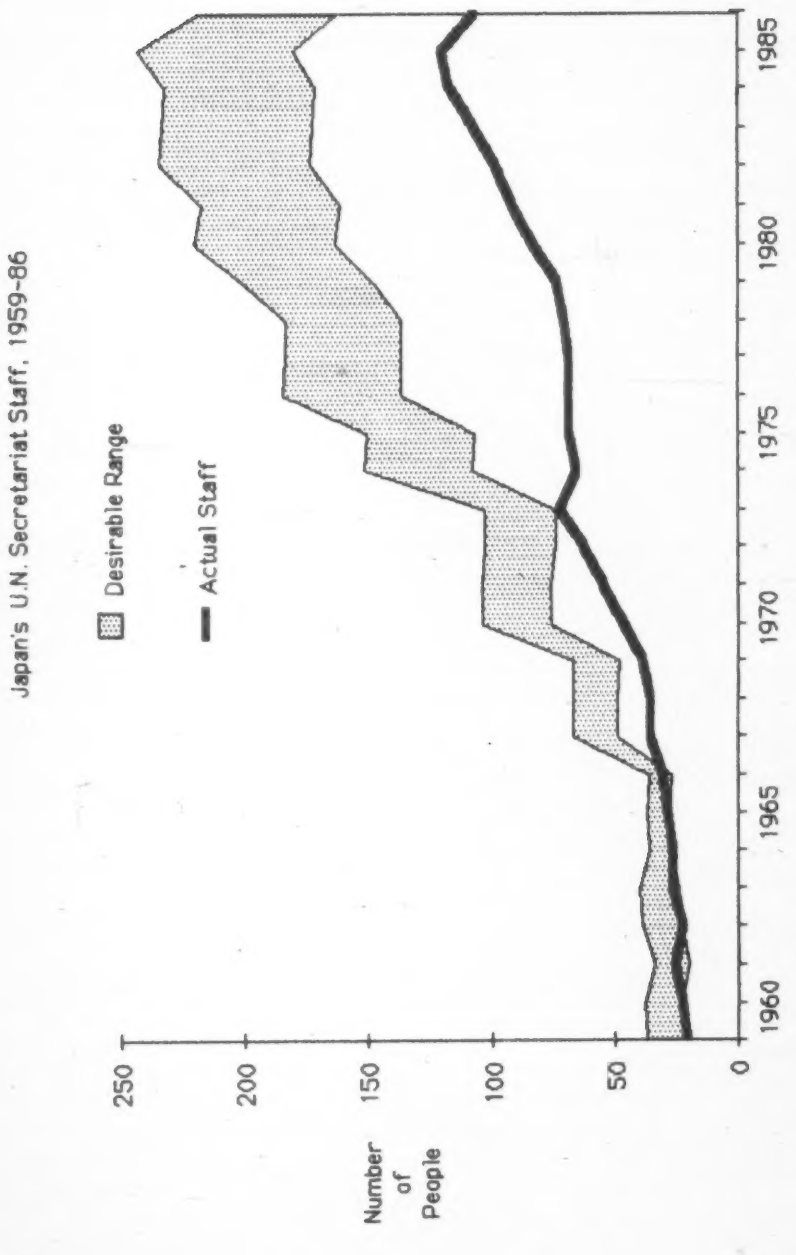
This conviction may seem idealistic, but it grows out of a long-held concept that Japan could serve as a role model of economic growth for all developing countries, and for Asia in particular. However, in order to protect its own interests without alienating the developing countries, cautious behavior seemed imperative. The idea that Japan would have to be responsive but careful on development issues is seen in this quote from diplomatic historian Kajima Morinosuke:

> . . . it is vitally important that Japan's diplomacy should be fully cognizant of the fact that the nations of Asia are intently watching Japan, trying to emulate her remarkable achievements in economic and other fields. It, therefore, must serve as a guidepost for the free countries of Asia, endeavoring at all times to avoid irrevocable diplomatic blunders on the international scene.

Organizational Constraints - Personnel and staffing problems present another major constraint on Japan's effectiveness in the international body. Successful involvement in the U.N. entails more than the ability to debate the issues; technically trained and politically astute international bureaucrats are required to administer U.N. programs. If a country is to have an impact at this level, the group must also provide patronage for new entrants into the system in order to bypass the barriers put up by the political and national cliques that have developed over the past 40 years.

For almost as long as Japan has participated in the U.N., it has been under-represented in terms of professional staff (see Chart). There are several reasons for this, including the fact that Japan is a relatively new member of the organization and missed out on the initial allocation of responsibilities; even now, the number of personnel slots assigned to Japan is not proportional to its relative financial support.

Moreover, Japanese personnel turnover is extremely high -- second only to the U.S.S.R. and the Eastern Bloc countries. This is due to several factors. About half of the country's U.N. appointees come from the Foreign Ministry or other government agencies. These bureaucrats are usually sent out



Source: U.N. Secretariat, Office of Personnel Data.

for two- to four-year tours and then cycled back to other positions. The distinct paucity of career U.N. employees can be partially attributed to the fact that salary levels and benefits are generally uncompetitive with those available to young professionals in Japan. There is also a limited pool of applicants because of the language barrier and the small proportion of Japanese with graduate degrees.

And there is the sociological or cultural element. Contracts for U.N. appointments are generally short term at the outset, with an understanding that a career appointment will follow. The security that Japanese employees expect, particularly young professionals beginning their careers, is necessarily absent. Despite recruitment drives specifically aimed at Japan, and an abortive attempt in 1979-80 to simulate Japanese-style employment security by suspending usual personnel practices and giving Japanese nationals special probationary appointments, little headway has been made.

Although the greatest proportion of recruitment spending still goes to finding Japanese nationals, the special contract arrangment was terminated after charges that it was unfair to job-seekers from other nations. "The major reason we make no progress," says one U.N. recruitment officer, "is that the institutional sense of commitment to the employee isn't there, and the uncertainty isn't appealing to the Japanese, especially the young people."

Japanese representation among U.N. staff may be smaller than it could be, but no one is complaining about quality. The group of 107 in the U.N. Secretariat (ranked fifth in number of staff by nationality) is distributed fairly evenly among the various political, economic, administrative and technical functional areas. Despite the high turnover rate, some have risen to positions of authority; the under secretary for public information is a Japanese national. Japan ranks approximately tenth in the number of staff employed by the U.N. Development Program (UNDP) and U.N. International Children's Fund (UNICEF). Japanese also make up the third-largest nationality group in the U.N. Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA). These three agencies receive the biggest share of Tokyo's voluntary U.N. contributions.

The Benefits of U.N. Participation

Despite these difficulties, Japanese officials consider the U.N. a valuable forum from which to validate and reaffirm fundamental policies such as comprehensive security. Japan can answer criticism about its international responsibilities by pointing to its activities in the U.N. And there are opportunities to exploit the international organization in other ways to achieve other diplomatic goals.

A good example of all these elements is the periodic gathering of world leaders in New York. Annual addresses at the General Assembly opening in September are now customary for Japanese foreign ministers. When the celebration of the U.N.'s 40th anniversary took place in October 1985, both Prime Minister Nakasone and Foreign Minister Shintaro Abe gave addresses outlining Japan's international policies and priorities and reiterating Tokyo's commitment to play a larger role in global affairs. Both Mr. Nakasone and Mr. Abe also used the anniversary celebration to further bilateral aims with both close friends and estranged nations. Mr. Abe was able to set in motion a visit to

Japan by Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze during his stay in New York (see JEI Report No. 38B, October 4, 1985, and No. 42B, November 1, 1985).

And there is the all-important question of international prestige. Despite the realities of day-to-day international trade-offs, Japan has always wanted to be recognized as an important country in a titular sense. The search for prestige continues, as seen in Japan's pursuit of a wider role at summits and other international meetings. In the case of the U.N., Japan also has ambitions. For many years Tokyo placed great emphasis on securing a permanent seat on the Security Council, convinced that its role would be limited without permanent access to this powerful decisionmaking body. From time to time Japan has been elected to the non-permanent seat allocated to Asia, most recently during the 1981-82 session. Efforts to gain a seat are still a Japanese goal. However, Security Council membership would require a change in the U.N. charter, and Japanese diplomats concede privately that it is not a realistic or high priority proposition.

New Approaches: New Activism?

There is evidence that Japan's approach toward the U.N. has matured, particularly in the last five years as the pressures of the Third World economic agenda have eased. The need to deal with various problems facing the organization has stimulated the new approach, as well as precipitated a tentative new activism in Japan's policy.

Because the Soviet Union and Eastern European states have withheld their contributions and the United States has drastically cut its support payments, the U.N. has come under severe financial strain, with a budget shortfall of approximately $240 million in 1985. Poor management has only exacerbated the problem. Japan, currently the second-largest U.N. contributor (see Table), has come under increasing pressure to take up the slack.

In previous financial crises Japan did not question the U.N.'s management and continued its contributions unabated. Now, say diplomats, Japan is demanding that the Secretary General address the fundamental problems precipitating the present crisis. A quick fix is unacceptable and Tokyo has said it will not approve increases in voluntary contributions until the matter is resolved.

When the United States withdrew from UNESCO in 1985 on the grounds that the organization was mismanaged, blatently politicized and anti-Western, the United Kingdom followed suit. Japanese policymakers, however, while acknowledging UNESCO's problems, have eliminated withdrawal as too drastic and opted for a policy of reform from within, fully understanding that this implies an unprecedented activism.

A major manifestation of this approach has been the decision to sponsor a plan to initiate a comprehensive review of U.N. administrative, budgetary and financial matters. First proposed by Foreign Minister Abe in September of last year, the idea centers around the appointment of an 18-member group of intergovernment experts to begin the reform process. Following a great deal of political compromise, which Japanese sponsors handled with agility, the resolution to establish the expert group was adopted by the General Assembly December 19.

Top Contributors to the United Nations Organization, 1982-84

(in millions of dollars)

	1982			1983			1984		
	Assessed	Voluntary	Total	Assessed	Voluntary	Total	Assessed	Voluntary	Total
United States	$520.0	$481.4	$1,001.3	$407.3	$463.5	$870.7	$450.2	$500.6	$950.8
Japan	162.9	231.2	394.1	172.2	240.3	412.5	168.3	193.0	361.4
West Germany	142.3	127.7	270.0	144.0	109.9	253.8	138.3	114.5	252.8
Italy	63.0	84.2	147.3	62.2	102.7	164.9	61.8	115.5	177.3
Canada	57.6	100.4	158.0	54.3	116.4	170.7	50.7	124.6	175.4
Great Britain	82.9	87.1	170.0	83.9	80.5	164.3	78.6	91.4	169.9
Soviet Union*	148.4	13.1	161.5	173.0	12.7	185.7	151.5	13.2	164.7
France	113.5	42.3	155.8	123.5	46.7	170.2	112.9	47.1	160.1
Sweden	23.5	118.3	211.7	21.8	148.2	169.9	23.1	135.7	158.8
Netherlands	28.4	169.6	198.0	29.2	135.1	164.3	29.7	117.5	147.3
All Contributors	1,709.8	2,301.2	4,011.0	1,669.1	2,203.6	3,872.7	1,621.9	2,225.5	3,847.4

* The Soviet Ukraine and Byelorussia are included in this figure.

Note: Assessed Contributions include funding for the U.N. Secretariat as well as the U.N. Emergency Force/Disengagement Observer Force, U.N. International Forces in Lebanon, International Labor Organization, Food and Agriculture Organization, U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, International Civil Aviation Organization, World Health Organization, Universal Postal Union, International Telecommunications Union, World Meteorological Association, International Maritime Organization, World Intellectual Property Organization and International Atomic Energy Agency.

Voluntary Contributions include support for the U.N. Forces in Cyprus, U.N. Industrial Development Organization, U.N. Environment Program, U.N. Center for Human Settlements, U.N. Children's Fund, U.N. Development Program, World Food Program, U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, U.N. Relief and Works Agency, U.N. Institute for Training and Research, U.N. Fund for Population Activities, and supplemental funding for ILO, FAO, UNESCO, WHO, UPU, IMO, WMO, WIPO, and IAEA.

Source: United Nations, Report by Committee on Contribution, Supplement No. 11, 1981/82 and 1983/84.

The Japanese delegation has now begun to formulate a follow-up plan. Assuming that the expert group will make a number of recommendations for submission by late summer, Japan's representatives will push for action on those changes around which a consensus has already been built, and will seek common ground on more difficult issues. The real action should begin with the new General Assembly session in September. Then the pressure and the spotlight, diplomats admit, will become increasingly uncomfortable and the test of Japan's initiative will begin in earnest.

There are differing viewpoints on whether the expert group proposal and the decision to spearhead U.N. reform mark a major step in the evolution of Japan's role in the organization. Most of the questions revolve around Japan's commitment to what on the surface appears to be a strong involvement. The reform initiative indeed is an unprecedented step for Japan, but whether it is precedent-setting or not remains a serious question.

Diplomats portray the reform initiative as a test case for Japan's more assertive role. They describe the initiative as a case of the katagawari principle in action, reflecting the greater degree of involvement and responsibility that Japan feels for the U.N. now that the United States seems to be backing away. But, insiders say, Japan has serious obstacles to overcome. Inside the U.N., building coalitions and striking bargains will be exceedingly difficult -- and the legacy of Japan's passivity will be a great disadvantage.

A short list of Japanese anxieties focuses on the suspicions of developing countries that Japan may be changing the U.N. to suit itself -- or worse -- to suit its traditional mentor, the United States. Tokyo's intention, of course, is not to weaken the international organization, but to adjust it to changing needs and circumstances. According to a diplomat involved, getting that across will not be easy. "There is a perception among many delegations about how sincerely we're aiming for the improvement of the U.N.," he says, arguing that Japan's large and increasing contributions to the organization as well as the many times its positions have diverged from the Western line are not taken into account by developing countries.

In Japan there are also mixed feelings about the new approach. Although the Nakasone administration has placed considerable emphasis on the U.N., a politician in Japan cannot win an election simply by stressing prominence there. The constituency for U.N. activism is primarily a foreign one, and despite sentimental feelings about the organization, the public is not terribly interested in the details. Steady domestic political support, therefore, becomes uncertain.

Moreover, the shape of the next government is an open question. If Mr. Nakasone or Mr. Abe hold the leadership position, there is a greater chance for continuity in U.N. policy. Mr. Nakasone's opponents are aware of the benefits of the U.N. forum. For example, all the political parties and several LDP factions sent representatives to an arms control conference in 1983, but an activist role may be too closely associated with the present administration.

Moreover, resistance could very well come from within the Foreign Ministry. Many diplomats seem unconvinced that greater U.N. involvement is a

high-priority foreign policy matter. The esoteric nature of much of the organization's activity seems irrelevant to international affairs. This brings up the question of whether Tokyo will be closely monitoring and supporting efforts by its New York delegation if the reform process does not run smoothly. If the lines of decisionmaking are tangled, the Japanese delegation will not be able to follow through with any kind of assertive approach.

"Cautious optimism" is how some American experts view Japan's newly prominent role. They stress that although the commitment level is high right now, it does not necessarily imply new leadership. Working within an institution to shape it or orchestrate the details of reform requires a set of goals, a vision of what shape the organization should take. Skeptics doubt that Japanese leaders or foreign policy specialists have thought that far ahead.

Looking Ahead

To predict Japan's future role in the U.N., it is necessary to take into consideration what the Japanese expect from the organization, as well as their willingness to develop new guidelines for behavior there. Withdrawing from the organization, for philosophical as well as historical reasons, is not an option. The Nakasone administration has chosen instead to take the offensive and attempt to initiate a review and reform of the administrative and financial problems facing the U.N. and its associated agencies. This adds institutional reform to the substantial list of issues to be managed there, including questions over Japan's financial contributions during the funding crisis, its participation in the U.N. peacekeeping forces, and the day-to-day challenge of maintaining good relations with both the United States and the industrialized West, and the developing countries.

The reform initiative may or may not indicate a new leadership role for Japan. Undercutting its attempt are lines of decisionmaking that hobble the ability of Japanese representatives to wage effective diplomatic battle. At the same time, there is a growing awareness that there are minimal diplomatic benefits and not much prestige to be derived from the U.N., shaky support from Tokyo, a host of bad perceptions about Japan's motives and intentions, and a need to develop a larger corps of experienced international functionaries willing to spend prolonged periods of time in the U.N. bureaucracy. Unless some extremely innovative solutions to these problems are found, it seems unlikely that Japan will be able to sustain a drive to the frontline of U.N. decisionmakers.

For further information, contact Sheri Hoptman.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Japan Economic Institute.